

Gardening Software

If you're itching to get out into the garden now that spring is here, your PC can help. Sue Gee reviews the best resources for helping you plan and plant the perfect plot

Gardening and computing might seem to be interests with very little in common, but gardening requires organisation and planning – something at which the PC excels.

Over the years, gardening software has developed into two distinct categories. Databases have a clear role to play in helping gardeners select and record details about plants, while drawing tools can help with the design of a garden and its planting schemes. Having started out as 2D computer-aided design (CAD) programs, garden designers have evolved to provide

3D visualisations that the user can walk through and have also added photo-editing elements to make them even more realistic.

In choosing products for this review, we looked for software that could help everyone from professional gardeners responsible for multiple sites to those with just a few square metres to tend. For the former, we've tested a database that can help with scheduling regular tasks that must be done in specific seasons; for the latter, we've found some online options that won't take up precious time that could be spent outdoors.

ARTVISION

Garden Composer 2005

★★★★★

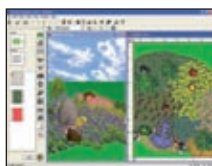
\$40 (around £20)

This is an updated version of the program known in the UK as Geoff Hamilton's 3D Garden Designer, which we last reviewed in *Labs*, *Shopper* October 2005. It now includes a Photo Designer module and a narrated tutorial made up of 19 short lessons. We previously criticised 3D Garden Designer for being difficult to use, but this tutorial helps new users to understand its many different features.

One puzzle it quickly solved is the difference between plan view and landscape view, which seems to be a plan view without the colour. In fact, it has facilities relating to relief – the slopes and bumps that affect most gardens. While 3D view is a simple concept, it is easy to misuse so you end up looking in the wrong direction or at the wrong angle, but the tutorial also provides a clear explanation of this. The final view option – stereographic – requires the use of special glasses for a 3D depth effect.

The program's plant encyclopedia contains almost 15,000 plant records, covering trees, shrubs, flowers and vegetables from all over the world, each with one or more pictures. The search facility for the database lets you search by plant type, colour and growing conditions, but to find one by name you have to scroll through the list using common or Latin names.

The encyclopedia also includes sections on pests and diseases, and the care required each month. When you create a garden plan, the program automatically lists all the plants with a calendar display of each month's tasks.



▲ Plan and landscape view in Garden Composer

DEEPROOT SOFTWARE

Deeproot Plant Base 1.5.4

★★★★★

£40 inc VAT



This well-implemented database contains 8,510 records, covering wild and cultivated plants, and 3,760 photographs. It covers plants from all over the world but was developed in the UK, so the plants' common names will be familiar and the cultivation advice is appropriate.

The intuitive interface makes the software easy to use. A menu panel offering the main choices is supplemented by icons in the toolbar. Plant Selector lets you choose plants by any combination of characteristics, including name, but if you know only part of a name the Find a Plant facility is easy to use.

You can create lists of plants, and the record card layout gives easy access to all the information you're likely to need. Photographs are shown in the Picture Browser at the bottom of the screen and can be displayed in a larger window by clicking on them. As well as summary information, the record card has five tabbed sections giving the plant's description, advice on cultivation and propagation, its design and use.

This database is highly customisable. You can edit all the fields on the record card, by adding notes or changing the details to reflect local conditions. You can also add new records and pictures. The Config options let you alter the format of the record card, including aspects such as the background colour, whether Centigrade or Fahrenheit is used to display minimum temperature tolerance and whether metric or imperial measurements are used. The program's help files are good and it includes a useful glossary.



▲ Click an image to see it in a bigger window

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SUMMARY

- ✓ Narrated tutorial
- ✓ Comprehensive database
- ✗ Sluggish response in 3D view

GARDENING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, 600MHz Pentium III processor, 256MB RAM, 100MB disk space SUPPLIER www.gardencomposer.com DETAILS www.gardencomposer.com

SUMMARY

- ✓ UK-based database
- ✓ Well-designed interface and record structure
- ✗ Lack of photographs

GARDENING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 95 or later, 200MHz Pentium processor, 64MB RAM, 212MB disk space SUPPLIER www.deeproot.co.uk DETAILS www.deeproot.co.uk

PROASSETProAsset Manager
Home Edition 1.0.26

★★★★★

£89 inc VAT (five-site licence)

ON THE COVER DISC This database is aimed at professional gardeners. It requires some setting up to make it useful, but the demo version includes sample data that is helpful.

The Feature templates list tasks required for specific sites. Many tasks are already set up in the demo and grouped together. Each task can have a time and a price. The calendar view allows you to schedule tasks and you can produce work tickets for staff by site and by rounds.

Telephone training is available and licences for 50 sites or more have one day's onsite training included.



▲ Feature templates list tasks for specific sites

SUMMARY

- ✓ Well-implemented database
- ✓ Can be used for over 100 sites
- ✗ Requires considerable setting up

GARDENING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98 or later, 200MHz Pentium processor, 256MB RAM, 10MB disk space SUPPLIER ProAsset 07989 193256 DETAILS www.proasset.co.uk

SMALL BLUE PRINTER

Garden Planner Home Edition 2.2

★★★★★

£20 (around £10)

ON THE COVER DISC This program is strictly 2D and lacks the information about plants that the other design programs here include. However, it is extremely easy to use.

The short animated introduction is all you need to start creating your own plan. We were slightly disappointed by the limitations of its sample plans, although the drag-and-drop facilities mean you won't be spending precious hours creating a plan. You can assign names to the object palettes in the properties box so it will produce a useful list when you generate a report.



▲ Create your own plans using drag and drop

SUMMARY

- ✓ Easy to use, with animated introduction
- ✓ Produces useful list of plants
- ✗ Only 2D; no plant information

GARDENING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/2000, 600MHz Pentium III processor, 256MB RAM, 5MB disk space SUPPLIER www.smallblueprinter.com/garden DETAILS www.smallblueprinter.com/garden

GSP

Geoff Hamilton's Plant Encyclopedia

★★★★★

£9.99 inc VAT

Geoff Hamilton's Plant Encyclopedia includes over 4,000 plants, each illustrated with a photograph on a record card that also provides a description and cultivation notes. Icons indicate height, spread and conditions required for plants. Foliage and flowering plants include a display indicating the months in which they add interest to your garden.

There are notes on soil type and which 'themes' the plant would fit in with: container plants, cottage garden, drought resistant, and so on. Plus, you can search for plants that satisfy several criteria.



▲ Search for plants that fulfil several criteria

SUMMARY

- ✓ Classic title that is still usable
- ✓ Cheap
- ✗ Not updated since 2002

GARDENING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 95 or later, 200MHz Pentium processor, 32MB RAM, 30MB disk space SUPPLIER GSP 01480 496666 DETAILS: www.gspsoftware.co.uk

FOCUS MULTIMEDIA

Your 3D Garden Double Pack Deluxe Edition

★★★★★

£13 inc VAT

The two programs in this pack – Your 3D Garden Designer and Your Garden Encyclopedia – are both US imports. The 3D view is difficult to control, and the lack of synchronicity in split-screen mode is exasperating.

There's no tutorial and the sample files include just plans of homes with some cursory landscaping. The encyclopedia contains over 17,000 entries, but its obvious US bias and poor search facility let it down. Its cumbersome interface allows you to view only one window at a time, so for additional details or photographs you will have to leave the main database screen.



▲ The 3D view is not the easiest to control

SUMMARY

- ✓ Cheap
- ✗ Outdated software that shows its age
- ✗ Not localised for the UK

GARDENING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/Me/2000/XP, Pentium processor, 16MB RAM, 65MB disk space SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.focusmm.co.uk

COMPLETE GARDENS
Interactive Plant Selector
and Pruning Guide

★★★★★

£25 inc VAT

BEST BUY This encyclopedia includes only 2,700 plants, but it offers a wide selection and won't mislead you with the inclusion of plants unsuitable for British conditions.

There are multiple attractive photographs for many plants and they are used to good effect. The use of icons makes it easy to search for plants and get information on them. Advice is offered on pruning, planting and propagation, feeding and care, and pests and diseases. You can add plants to your 'wanted' list and use the calendar facility to find out when to prune or plant them.



▲ Icons make it easy to search for plants

SUMMARY

- ✓ UK-specific
- ✓ High-quality photography
- ✗ Only 2,700 plants

GARDENING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/Me/2000/XP/Vista, Pentium II processor, 256MB RAM SUPPLIER Complete Gardens 01865 512561 DETAILS www.complete-gardens.co.uk

BBC

BBC Gardening

★★★★★

www.bbc.uk/gardening

The BBC has a long-established reputation for the quality of its gardening advice, and its website is well worth a visit. For experienced gardeners, there's help with pests and diseases and a link to the Royal Horticultural Society's online Plant Finder, which allows you to search thousands of records.

The site has an online version of Alan Titchmarsh's *How To Be A Gardener*, which includes modules on growing conditions, plant types, caring for plants and garden design.

The Virtual Garden tool allows you to create or edit templates and view them as plans or in 3D. It's more limited than standalone software, but it does include a tutorial and it is easy to use.



▲ Use Virtual Garden to create and edit templates

SUMMARY

- ✓ Plenty of helpful advice
- ✓ Free garden-design program
- ✗ Limited amount of material

DOWNLOADABLE SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98 SE or later, Pentium II processor, 256MB RAM, 7MB disk space DETAILS www.bbc.uk/gardening